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Paul G. Summers**

**Department of Commerce and Insurance
Commissioner Paula Flowers**

CONSUMER ALERT

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**ATTORNEY GENERAL WARNS CONSUMERS TO BEWARE OF INTERNATIONAL
INVESTMENT, MAIL FRAUD SCAMS**

If you receive a letter or e-mail from someone seeking a “foreign partner” to help transfer millions of dollars from another country, report it to authorities and then delete it or throw it away. It is most likely a scam targeting people who want to make easy money, says Tennessee Attorney General Paul G. Summers.

“You should always be suspicious when someone offers you a lot of money for doing very little,” Attorney General Summers said. “We want to make sure Tennesseans know they could lose a lot of hard-earned money as a result of these empty promises.”

In some of these scams, the fraud is perpetuated by a letter or e-mail from an “official-sounding” foreigner looking for help as a result of some civil war or other strife in their native country. Consumers are often sent fake government documents proposing the fraudulent business deal.

The fraud has taken a number of forms with people claiming to be from other countries primarily in Africa, asking someone for help and promising a reward in return. It usually begins with someone asking for help transferring large amounts of money to the United States as

proceeds from a bogus will or other phony business transaction with promises of a share of the funds. The solicitor will ask the recipient to keep the matter confidential regardless of their response to the offer.

If the consumer agrees to participate, the con artist will eventually ask for a never-ending assortment of advance fees to cover “legal costs,” “taxes,” or even “government bribes” supposedly to process the funds.

In some cases, a business is invited to participate as a contractor on a so-called major improvement project in a foreign country. After more communication, the business is requested to wire transfer money to a bank account in Canada. After that, problems arise that may require additional money.

“The sole purpose of the fraud is to get you to send money up front,” Attorney General Summers said. “Once they get as much money from you as possible, you will never hear from them again.”

Mary Clement, director of the Tennessee Division of Consumer Affairs, said, “This type of e-mail solicitation may become more prevalent now that legislation has been enacted to prohibit unsolicited faxes. As with any e-mail, the consumer should never open an e-mail from an unknown sender. These communications could contain a myriad of attachments or viruses that automatically download themselves onto the consumer's system. Consumers can call the Division of Consumer Affairs with any questions or concerns.”

State officials offer the following tips to help you identify a potential scam:

- *The correspondence usually offers a commission of at least \$10 million in exchange for assistance with the money transfer to the United States.
- *You may be encouraged to travel overseas to complete the transaction.
- *The solicitor generally provides numerous forged documents with official-looking stamps, seals, and logos to validate the phony offer.
- *Postal Inspectors note that the stamps on the letters are often counterfeit, as are any meter impressions since postage meters aren't used in Nigeria.
- *The letters are often typed and photocopied and usually marked “urgent” and “confidential.”
- *Many times the victim will be asked to provide blank company letterhead, which will later be used to write fake recommendations to other potential victims.

“If it looks like easy money, it probably is, but only for the con artist, not for you,” Attorney General Summers said. “It is unlikely a reputable business would ask you to advance these sorts of fees and then ask a consumer to keep the matter ‘confidential.’”

If you suspect you are being solicited by a con artist, you may contact the Tennessee Division of Consumer Affairs at 1-800-342-8385, the U.S. Secret Service at 202-406-5850 or send the suspicious correspondence to the Inspection Service Operations Support Group, Two gateway Center, 9th floor, Newark, NJ 07175-0001.